



Iowa Children's Justice

February, 2010
Infants and Toddlers in Child Welfare

February topic: Infant and Toddler Needs

Increasing numbers of infants and young children with complicated and serious physical, mental health and developmental problems are being placed in foster care. Nationally, the rate of developmental delay among children in the child welfare system is approximately four to five times the rate found in the general child population. Statistically, these children also have much higher rates of serious emotional and behavioral problems. Abused and neglected children can also be at risk for developing other serious health conditions, often due to the same circumstances (i.e. parental substance abuse or mental illness, prenatal drug exposure) that necessitated their placement.

The science of early childhood development is unequivocal that early intervention can be effective – particularly during the first three years of life when the brain is developing. Children referred for early intervention services can “shift the odds” for better outcomes in their favor. Early intervention services [Early ACCESS in Iowa] are an entitlement for all children from birth to age 3.

Why early intervention is important

During infancy and early childhood, the foundations are laid for the development of trusting relationships, self esteem, problem solving, focused learning and impulse control. To promote and facilitate permanency and well-being it is imperative that lawyers, judges, child advocates and caregivers are able to identify special needs and seek necessary treatment for children in care. Early interventions in the form of screenings and assessments of physical and mental health, developmental milestones and educational needs are keys to minimizing the long-term effects of traumatic events (i.e. abuse, neglect, grief and loss) on brain development and ensuring healthy children.

Contributions Judges can make

Ensuring the healthy development of infants and young children in the child welfare system requires that they receive quality medical care, mental and developmental health services and high quality educational services in a stable, caring environment.

The following questions were developed as a guide for lawyers, judges and child advocates as a first step toward advocacy and positive intervention for young children. Armed with questions – and the research to support the reasons for asking – the judge can be of great assistance in assuring the needs of infants and toddlers involved in the child welfare system are met.

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Important questions to gauge the well-being of young children

Physical Health:

- Has the child received a comprehensive health and dental assessment since entering foster care?
- Were there any presenting problems?

Developmental Health

- Is the child developmentally on target?
- How well has the child adapted to his/her daily environment and routines?

Mental Health

- Has the child received a mental health screening, assessment or evaluation?
- Have treatment or counseling services been offered if warranted?

Education

- Is the child enrolled in an early childhood program such as Head Start, Early Head Start or pre-kindergarten?
- How is the program addressing the child's special needs?

Out of Home Placement

- Is the child placed with caregivers who understand the child's special social and emotional needs?
- Do the caregivers have access to information and support related to the child's special needs?
- What efforts are being made to keep the child in a consistent placement?

More information about early intervention for infants and toddlers

More information about Iowa's early intervention program, Early ACCESS can be found on the Iowa Department of Education website:

http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=633&Itemid=1270

For more information about the Polk County Court Teams for Change Project, please contact Judge Connie Cohen at connie.cohen@iowacourts.gov or Judy Norris, Court Teams for Change (Zero to Three) Coordinator, at jnorris@zerotothree.org

Information in this article was adapted from "Questions Every Judge and Lawyer Should Ask About Infants and Toddlers in the Child Welfare System" by Joy D. Osofsky, Candice L. Maze, Judge Cindy S. Lederman, Chief Justice Martha P. Grace, and Sheryl Dicker in the *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* (Spring, 2004) published by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

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